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Behind the Hunt for Bin Laden

By MARK MAZZETTI, HELENE COOPER and PETER BAKER

WASHINGTON — For years, the agonizing search for Osama bin Laden kept coming up empty. Then last July, Pakistanis working for the Central Intelligence Agency drove up behind a white Suzuki navigating the bustling streets near Peshawar, Pakistan, and wrote down the car's license plate.

The man in the car was Bin Laden's most trusted courier, and over the next month C.I.A. operatives would track him throughout central Pakistan. Ultimately, administration officials said, he led them to a sprawling compound at the end of a long dirt road and surrounded by tall security fences in a wealthy hamlet 35 miles from the Pakistani capital.

On a moonless night eight months later, 79 American commandos in four helicopters descended on the compound, the officials said. Shots rang out. A helicopter stalled and would not take off. Pakistani authorities, kept in the dark by their allies in Washington, scrambled forces as the American commandos rushed to finish their mission and leave before a confrontation. Of the five dead, one was a tall, bearded man with a bloodied face and a bullet in his head. A member of the Navy Seals snapped his picture with a camera and uploaded it to analysts who fed it into a facial recognition program.

And just like that, history's most expansive, expensive and exasperating manhunt was over. The inert frame of Osama bin Laden, America's enemy No. 1, was placed in a helicopter for burial at sea, never to be seen or feared again. A nation that spent a decade tormented by its failure to catch the man responsible for nearly 3,000 fiery deaths in New York, outside Washington and Pennsylvania on Sept. 11, 2001, at long last had its sense of finality, at least in this one difficult chapter.

For an intelligence community that had endured searing criticism for a string of intelligence failures over the past decade, Bin Laden's killing brought a measure of redemption. For a military that has slogged through two, and now three vexing wars in Muslim countries, it provided an unalloyed success. And for a president whose national security leadership has come under question, it proved an affirming moment that will enter the history books.

The raid was the culmination of years of painstaking intelligence work, including the [interrogation](#) of C.I.A. detainees in secret prisons in Eastern Europe, where sometimes what was not said was as useful as what was. Intelligence agencies eavesdropped on telephone calls and e-mails of the courier's Arab family in a Persian Gulf state and pored over satellite images of the compound in Abbottabad to determine a "pattern of life" that might decide whether the operation would be worth the risk.

As more than a dozen White House, intelligence and Pentagon officials described the operation on Monday, the past few weeks were a nerve-racking amalgamation of what-ifs and negative scenarios. "There wasn't a meeting when someone didn't mention 'Black Hawk Down,' " a senior administration official said, referring to the disastrous 1993 battle in Somalia in which two American helicopters were shot down and some of their crew killed in action. The failed mission to rescue hostages in Iran in 1980 also loomed large.

Administration officials split over whether to launch the operation, whether to wait and continue monitoring until they were more sure that Bin Laden was really there, or whether to go for a less risky bombing assault. In the end, [President Obama](#) opted against a bombing that could do so much damage it might be uncertain whether Bin Laden was really hit and chose to send in commandos. A "fight your way out" option was built into the plan, with two helicopters following the two main assault copters as backup in case of trouble.

On Sunday afternoon, as the helicopters raced over Pakistani territory, the president and his advisers gathered in the Situation Room of the White House to monitor the operation as it unfolded. Much of the time was spent in silence. Mr. Obama looked "stone faced," one aide said. Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) fingered his rosary beads. "The minutes passed like days," recalled [John O. Brennan](#), the White House counterterrorism chief.

The code name for Bin Laden was "Geronimo." The president and his advisers watched [Leon E. Panetta](#), the C.I.A. director, on a video screen, narrating from his agency's headquarters across the Potomac River what was happening in faraway Pakistan.

"They've reached the target," he said.

Minutes passed.

"We have a visual on Geronimo," he said.

A few minutes later: "Geronimo EKIA."

Enemy Killed In Action. There was silence in the Situation Room.

Finally, the president spoke up.

“We got him.”

Filling in the Gaps

Years before the Sept. 11 attacks transformed Bin Laden into the world’s most feared terrorist, the C.I.A. had begun compiling a detailed dossier about the major players inside his global terror network.

It wasn’t until after 2002, when the agency began rounding up Qaeda operatives — and subjecting them to hours of brutal interrogation sessions in secret overseas prisons — that they finally began filling in the gaps about the foot soldiers, couriers and money men Bin Laden relied on.

Prisoners in American custody told stories of a trusted courier. When the Americans ran the man’s pseudonym past two top-level detainees — the chief planner of the Sept. 11 attacks, [Khalid Shaikh Mohammed](#); and [Al Qaeda’s](#) operational chief, Abu Faraj al-Libi — the men claimed never to have heard his name. That raised suspicions among interrogators that the two detainees were lying and that the courier probably was an important figure.

As the hunt for Bin Laden continued, the spy agency was being buffeted on other fronts: the botched intelligence assessments about weapons of mass destruction leading up to the Iraq War, and the intense criticism for using [waterboarding](#) and other extreme interrogation methods that critics said amounted to torture.

By 2005, many inside the C.I.A. had reached the conclusion that the Bin Laden hunt had grown cold, and the agency’s top clandestine officer ordered an overhaul of the agency’s counterterrorism operations. The result was Operation Cannonball, a bureaucratic reshuffling that placed more C.I.A. case officers on the ground in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

With more agents in the field, the C.I.A. finally got the courier’s family name. With that, they turned to one of their greatest investigative tools — the [National Security Agency](#) began intercepting telephone calls and e-mail messages between the man’s family and anyone inside Pakistan. From there they got his full name.

Last July, Pakistani agents working for the C.I.A. spotted him driving his vehicle near Peshawar. When, after weeks of surveillance, he drove to the sprawling compound in Abbottabad, American intelligence operatives felt they were onto something big, perhaps even Bin Laden himself. It was hardly the spartan cave in the mountains that many had envisioned as his hiding place. Rather, it was a three-story house ringed by 12-foot-high

concrete walls, topped with barbed wire and protected by two security fences. He was, said Mr. Brennan, the White House official, “hiding in plain sight.”

Back in Washington, Mr. Panetta met with Mr. Obama and his most senior national security aides, including Mr. Biden, Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) and Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#). The meeting was considered so secret that White House officials didn’t even list the topic in their alerts to each other.

That day, Mr. Panetta spoke at length about Bin Laden and his presumed hiding place.

“It was electric,” an administration official who attended the meeting said. “For so long, we’d been trying to get a handle on this guy. And all of a sudden, it was like, wow, there he is.”

There was guesswork about whether Bin Laden was indeed inside the house. What followed was weeks of tense meetings between Mr. Panetta and his subordinates about what to do next.

While Mr. Panetta advocated an aggressive strategy to confirm Bin Laden’s presence, some C.I.A. clandestine officers worried that the most promising lead in years might be blown if bodyguards suspected the compound was being watched and spirited the Qaeda leader out of the area.

For weeks last fall, spy satellites took detailed photographs, and the N.S.A. worked to scoop up any communications coming from the house. It wasn’t easy: the compound had neither a phone line nor Internet access. Those inside were so concerned about security that they burned their trash rather than put it on the street for collection.

In February, Mr. Panetta called Vice Adm. William H. McRaven, commander of the Pentagon’s Joint [Special Operations Command](#), to C.I.A. headquarters in Langley, Va., to give him details about the compound and to begin planning a military strike.

Admiral McRaven, a veteran of the covert world who had written a book on American Special Operations, spent weeks working with the C.I.A. on the operation, and came up with three options: a helicopter assault using American commandos, a strike with B-2 bombers that would obliterate the compound, or a joint raid with Pakistani intelligence operatives who would be told about the mission hours before the launch.

Weighing the Options

On March 14, Mr. Panetta took the options to the White House. C.I.A. officials had been taking satellite photos, establishing what Mr. Panetta described as the habits of people living at the compound. By now evidence was mounting that Bin Laden was there.

The discussions about what to do took place as American relations with Pakistan were severely strained over the arrest of Raymond A. Davis, the C.I.A. contractor imprisoned for shooting two Pakistanis on a crowded street in Lahore in January. Some of Mr. Obama's top aides worried that any military assault to capture or kill Bin Laden might provoke an angry response from Pakistan's government, and that Mr. Davis could end up dead in his jail cell. Mr. Davis was ultimately released on March 16, giving a freer hand to his colleagues.

On March 22, the president asked his advisers their opinions on the options.

Mr. Gates was skeptical about a helicopter assault, calling it risky, and instructed military officials to look into aerial bombardment using smart bombs. But a few days later, the officials returned with the news that it would take some 32 bombs of 2,000 pounds each. And how could the American officials be certain that they had killed Bin Laden?

"It would have created a giant crater, and it wouldn't have given us a body," said one American intelligence official.

A helicopter assault emerged as the favored option. The Navy Seals team that would hit the ground began holding dry runs at training facilities on both American coasts, which were made up to resemble the compound. But they were not told who their target might be until later.

Last Thursday, the day after the president released his long-form birth certificate — such "silliness," he told reporters, was distracting the country from more important things — Mr. Obama met again with his top national security officials.

Mr. Panetta told the group that the C.I.A. had "red-teamed" the case — shared their intelligence with other analysts who weren't involved to see if they agreed that Bin Laden was probably in Abbottabad. They did. It was time to decide.

Around the table, the group went over and over the negative scenarios. There were long periods of silence, one aide said. And then, finally, Mr. Obama spoke: "I'm not going to tell you what my decision is now — I'm going to go back and think about it some more." But he added, "I'm going to make a decision soon."

Sixteen hours later, he had made up his mind. Early the next morning, four top aides were summoned to the White House Diplomatic Room. Before they could brief the president, he

cut them off. “It’s a go,” he said. The earliest the operation could take place was Saturday, but officials cautioned that cloud cover in the area meant that Sunday was much more likely.

The next day, Mr. Obama took a break from rehearsing for the White House Correspondents Dinner that night to call Admiral McRaven, to wish him luck.

On Sunday, White House officials canceled all West Wing tours so unsuspecting tourists and visiting celebrities wouldn’t accidentally run into all the high-level national security officials holed up in the Situation Room all afternoon monitoring the feeds they were getting from Mr. Panetta. A staffer went to Costco and came back with a mix of provisions — turkey pita wraps, cold shrimp, potato chips, soda.

At 2:05 p.m., Mr. Panetta sketched out the operation to the group for a final time. Within an hour, the C.I.A. director began his narration, via video from Langley. “They’ve crossed into Pakistan,” he said.

Across the Border

The commando team had raced into the Pakistani night from a base in Jalalabad, just across the border in Afghanistan. The goal was to get in and get out before Pakistani authorities detected the breach of their territory by what were to them unknown forces and reacted with possibly violent results.

In Pakistan, it was just past midnight on Monday morning, and the Americans were counting on the element of surprise. As the first of the helicopters swooped in at low altitudes, neighbors heard a loud blast and gunshots. A woman who lives two miles away said she thought it was a terrorist attack on a Pakistani military installation. Her husband said no one had any clue Bin Laden was hiding in the quiet, affluent area. “It’s the closest you can be to Britain,” he said of their neighborhood.

The Seal team stormed into the compound — the raid awakened the group inside, one American intelligence official said — and a firefight broke out. One man held an unidentified woman living there as a shield while firing at the Americans. Both were killed. Two more men died as well, and two women were wounded. American authorities later determined that one of the slain men was Bin Laden’s son, Hamza, and the other two were the courier and his brother.

The commandos found Bin Laden on the third floor, wearing the local loose-fitting tunic and pants known as a shalwar kameez, and officials said he resisted before he was shot above the left eye near the end of the 40-minute raid. The American government gave few details about

his final moments. "Whether or not he got off any rounds, I frankly don't know," said Mr. Brennan, the White House counterterrorism chief. But a senior Pentagon official, briefing on the condition of anonymity, said it was clear Bin Laden "was killed by U.S. bullets."

American officials insisted they would have taken Bin Laden into custody if he did not resist, although they considered that likelihood remote. "If we had the opportunity to take Bin Laden alive, if he didn't present any threat, the individuals involved were able and prepared to do that," Mr. Brennan said.

One of Bin Laden's wives identified his body, American officials said. A picture taken by a SEALs commando and processed through facial recognition software suggested a 95 percent certainty that it was Bin Laden. Later, DNA tests comparing samples with relatives found a 99.9 percent match.

But the Americans faced other problems. One of their helicopters stalled and could not take off. Rather than let it fall into the wrong hands, the commandos moved the women and children to a secure area and blew up the malfunctioning helicopter.

By that point, though, the Pakistani military was scrambling forces in response to the incursion into Pakistani territory. "They had no idea about who might have been on there," Mr. Brennan said. "Thankfully, there was no engagement with Pakistani forces."

As they took off at 1:10 a.m. local time, taking a trove of documents and computer hard drives from the house, the Americans left behind the women and children. A Pakistani official said nine children, from 2 to 12 years old, are now in Pakistani custody.

The Obama administration had already determined it would follow Islamic tradition of burial within 24 hours to avoid offending devout Muslims, yet concluded Bin Laden would have to be buried at sea, since no country would be willing to take the body. Moreover, they did not want to create a shrine for his followers.

So the Qaeda leader's body was washed and placed in a white sheet in keeping with tradition. On the aircraft carrier Carl Vinson, it was placed in a weighted bag as an officer read prepared religious remarks, which were translated into Arabic by a native speaker, according to the senior Pentagon official.

The body then was placed on a prepared flat board and eased into the sea. Only a small group of people watching from one of the large elevator platforms that move aircraft up to the flight deck were witness to the end of America's most wanted fugitive.

Reporting was contributed by Elisabeth Bumiller, Charlie Savage and Steven Lee Myers from Washington, Adam Ellick from New York, and Ismail Khan from Peshawar, Pakistan.